

CHIP-ing away at the uninsured

By JENNIFER BYRD - Associated Press Writer - 08/10/06

HELENA — The number of children without health insurance coverage in Montana is declining, a trend attributable to increases in public health insurance plans, a national study released Wednesday shows.

But 35,000 kids in the state are still uninsured, and the number of children covered by private health care plans has gone down, the study found.

The study was released by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a Plainsboro, N.J., health advocacy organization. The analysis was compiled from census figures by the State Health Data Assistance Center at the University of Minnesota.

The analysis shows that the number of Montana children who have private health care coverage decreased by nearly 28 percent from 1997 to 2004, meaning 44,000 fewer children have private coverage. During the same period, however, the number of kids enrolled in public health programs, such as Medicaid or the Montana Children's Health Insurance Plan, increased by about 30 percent, the analysis said.

"Medicaid and Montana CHIP have provided a much-needed safety net for Montana's children," Betty Hidalgo of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies: The Montana Coalition, said in a news release. "Because of these programs, working parents don't have to choose between filling the refrigerator and filling a prescription."

Children in Montana families of four earning up to \$30,000 a year may qualify for CHIP.

State officials used the report's release to kick off a new campaign to enroll eligible children in those programs during the back-to-school period.

"It's never too early to be thinking about health insurance for your kids," said Joan Miles, director of the state Department of Public Health and Human Services, at a news conference Wednesday. "Please don't wait until your kids are sick to look for health insurance."

Miles said there are about 700 CHIP slots currently available for eligible children because the Montana Legislature expanded the program during its 2005 session.

Different agencies will try to enroll uninsured children in CHIP at a health fair in Helena on Saturday.

"Some people don't think they're eligible and they are," Miles said. "We need to get the word out to those people."

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch said the back-to-school period was the best time to get the word out.

"When we talk about heading back to school, we need to add health insurance to our checklist," she said. "We can smooth the road to better learning if we get everyone who is eligible enrolled in CHIP."

On the Web

www.coveringkidsandfamilies.org